

Becoming an academic in Spanish higher education: an in-depth narrative study

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Abstract

Purpose – This article focuses on understanding the evolution of the academic identity of a university academic within the contemporary university context, highlighting the significant influence of professional performance evaluations.

Design/methodology/approach – In order to achieve the objectives, a narrative-biographical approach was used, through an in-depth analysis of the life and professional career of a Spanish academic.

Findings – The results reveal a progression in identity from a state of naivety to that of a survivor, characterized by a strong adherence to the demands of scientific production, with research assuming a central role. This shift is motivated by an enduring pursuit of stable employment conducive to full professional and personal development. Several factors influence this change, including the context of evaluation, lack of funding, relationship with the thesis supervisor, and job instability, among others. The article concludes by outlining policy implications aimed at enhancing the work and professional standards of university faculty. These recommendations include awareness-raising initiatives, re-evaluating existing evaluation systems, and promoting institutional support, among other measures. Implementing these strategies is expected to optimize the professional growth of academics and, therefore, enhance the quality of services provided by universities.

Originality/value – Although previous research has acknowledged the impact of these evaluations, this study stands out by exploring how academic identity is shaped and reconfigured over the course of a career.

Keywords Academic identity, Accountability, Narrative inquiry, Higher education, Spain, Academic career, Evaluation

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Throughout the history of social science research, the understanding of social reality was traditionally achieved through the analysis of social structures. However, as the subject undergoes an historical re-evaluation, assuming a central role as the driving force of these structures, a more nuanced understanding of the social reality emerges. According to Bolívar (2014), investigating and understanding the particularities and singularities of the subject become fundamental for shedding light on the impact of structures on social reality. In this context, therefore, the exploration of concepts such as identity, professional identity, or academic identity – central to the present study – acquires a pivotal role in advancing social research.

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Academic identity, a multifaceted concept rooted in social theories, is understood as a social and dynamic construct shaped by the interplay between individual factors (characteristics, vision, values, experiences) and the various external structures inherent in the academic profession (social, political, economic, cultural, and institutional) (Tülübaş and Göktürk, 2023). In recent decades, the study of this concept has become very popular, particularly in response to growing concerns about the impact of changes in higher education. These global changes, resulting from standardisation and globalisation processes (Brøgger, 2019), have taken the form of an increase in enrolments, the proliferation of internationalisation efforts, the promotion of new technological tools, heightened competition between institutions, the expansion of privatisation initiatives, or the acquisition of private sector practices as management tools, among other developments.

Nevertheless, among these myriad changes, the rise of accountability systems as a mechanism for overseeing the quality of the higher education system has been a prominent development (Tomicic, 2019). Consequently, recent years have witnessed a surge in evaluation processes focused on various elements (including courses, mobility, faculty, and institutions,) with significant consequences such as increased funding, enrolments, and social prestige (Dougherty and Natow, 2019).

Of particular significance within these accountability processes are the evaluations applied to university academics, where success determines access, promotion, retention, or the acquisition of salary incentives or research funding. These evaluation systems, pervasive worldwide (*PEP* and *ACADEMIA* -Spain-, *Research Excellence Framework* -United Kingdom-, *STAR METRICS* -United States-, *Research Assessment Exercise* -Hong Kong-, *Excellence in Research for Australia* -Australia-, ...), are characterized by the prioritization of research activity over other functions, which means that the professional future of university academics depends on this activity (San Fabián, 2020; Oliveira et al., 2024). This situation has an impact on academics (including their professional activity, personal life, ethics, health, and academic identity) and, as a direct consequence, on the future of universities (Caballero et al., 2024).

In this context, recent years have witnessed an increase in the number of studies focused on analysing this impact on the identity of academics (Marques et al., 2024; Zhang and Gong, 2024). These studies focus on describing and analysing the various forms of identity constructed as a consequence of the current context of Higher Education, taking into account different elements.

Thus, Ylijoki and Ursin (2013) described nine types of identity, which are based on various perspectives regarding the contemporary role and implications of being an academic (identities of resistance, loss, administrative work overload, job insecurity, success, mobility, change agency, work-life balance, and bystander).

On the other hand, Ylijoki and Henriksson (2017) mention five types of identities: the Novice of the Academic Elite, the Victim of the Teaching Trap, the Academic Worker, the Research Group Member, and the Academic Freelancer. These identities are characterized by core commitments, perspectives on the university, levels of freedom or autonomy, and career support. Similarly, the study by Enright and Facer (2017) highlights four identity types: the Disciplinary, the Worker Bee, the Freelancer, and the Social Activist.

Likewise, Huang et al. (2016) cite six types of identities according to the vision of the university, the strategies developed, and the perception of the changes in higher education (managerial advocate, academic chameleon, knowledge worker, stressed faculty, resolute pilgrim).

Finally, we highlight the study by Djerasimovic and Villani (2020), which describes four different identities based on aspects such as the vision of the university, core commitment, and the degree of collegiality (Individualist-Philomath, Mode 1 Academic -Aspiring and established-, Mode 2 Academic and Student-Neophyte).

In short, these studies describe the identity of individuals in the current panorama of Higher Education. In most cases, these identities are characterised by a series of common elements such as the prioritisation of research activity, increased workload, elevated levels of stress, anxiety, insecurity, and job dissatisfaction, along with socio-family problems (Guthrie *et al.*, 2017; Acker and Webber, 2017; Saura and Bolívar, 2019; Apreile *et al.*, 2020; Mula-Falcón and Caballero, 2023). However, these studies do not establish how these identities evolve throughout the trajectory of each individual. That is, how the individual's identity is configured and re-configured until the development of their current identity remains unexplored.

In response to this gap, this article aims to analyse and understand the evolution of academic identity throughout a professional trajectory. Utilizing a narrative-biographical approach, we conducted an in-depth analysis of the life and professional experience of Blas (pseudonym), a Spanish academic. In this analysis, we describe the evolution of Blas' identity, highlighting key stages and delving into those elements and motivations that were decisive in his transformation.

In the following sections, the research will be contextualised by specifying the distinctive features of the academic career in Spain. The method employed will be detailed and justified, as well as the criteria for the selection of the participant. The results will then be presented and discussed in relation to the international literature. Finally, a series of conclusions and implications will be discussed.

1.1 The academic career in Spain

To be an academic in Spain, it is necessary to hold a PhD degree, typically acquired after completing a four-year doctoral program (in the case of full-time enrolment). This degree can be pursued with or without public (university or national and/or regional governments) or private funding. After obtaining a doctoral degree, it is possible to embark on a professional career in the university sector.

The academic career path in Spain includes four progressive categories which differ in salary levels and degree of stability: assistant doctor (temporary five-year contract, lowest salaries), contracted doctor (permanent employment contract), associate professor (civil servant), and full professor (civil servant, lowest teaching load and highest salaries) [1]. The academic system in Spain involves the transition from one category to another, the last one (full professor) being optional.

The Spanish academic system employs a dual process for transitioning between categories, a procedure that is repeated for each of the categories outlined in the previous paragraph. Initially, individuals must obtain a national accreditation based on merits in teaching, management, research, and transfer (RD415/2015) must be obtained. Once accreditation has been obtained, it is necessary to pass a selective test based on merits for the category of assistant doctor. For the remaining categories, a public presentation test is held in which the candidate's scientific and teaching career is evaluated. Both tests are organised by the universities themselves.

Moreover, these evaluations are characterised by the prioritisation of the research function, particularly at the initial levels. For instance, for the accreditation of assistant doctor or contracted doctor, the research function accounts for 60% of the total evaluation. The same is true of the selective tests for doctoral assistants where, depending on the university, research activity accounts for between 55 and 45% of the total. In the case of associate professors and full professors, these requirements are relaxed, and no percentages are mentioned, but the preference for teaching and research work over other activities is emphasised.

Consequently, within the framework of the Spanish higher education system, a university academic is compelled to secure four national accreditations over the course of their career,

coupled with the successful completion of four selective evaluations corresponding to each professional category. The outcomes of these processes not only determine their remuneration but also significantly impact their job stability and teaching load.

2. Methodology

The main objective of this study is to understand how and why the academic identity of a university academic evolves in the context of today's university. Therefore, the aim is to describe the evolution of the participant's identity, as well as to determine the elements that contribute to the changes and ensuing consequences.

To do so, we take a dynamic and interactionist perspective on the concept of academic identity (Saura and Bolívar, 2019). From this perspective, we conceive academic identities as a social and subjective construction, a consequence of the dialogue between (1) individual self-perception, (2) various factors such as beliefs, motivations, values, and personal experiences (agency), and (3) the features of the broader social environment - economic, social, political, cultural aspects - (structure) (Drennan *et al.*, 2017; McAlpine and Amundsen, 2018). As a result, each participant has a unique but liquid identity, i.e. in continuous change and development. Therefore, over the course of each participant's career, the academic identity evolves, giving rise to various nuances (Kreber, 2010).

To respond to the proposed objectives and in alignment with the identity perspective outlined, a biographical-narrative approach was adopted through life stories. The aim of this approach is to give meaning and understanding to the participant's lived and narrated experience. Put simply, the goal is to determine what happened and how it affected their identity project (Bolívar and Domingo, 2019). Furthermore, this approach makes it possible to link the lived experience with the historical-temporal reality in which they are immersed, contributing to a deeper and more holistic understanding of the ways of being and acting of individuals (Goodson *et al.*, 2016). To this end, an in-depth interview was conducted using reflective deepening cascades (Kelchtermans, 2016). Several cycles of interviews were conducted in succession with each session beginning with the clarification, in-depth elaboration, and validation of the data yielded from the preceding interviews. The conversations focused on reflecting on the changes generated in their trajectory, as well as on the elements that gave rise to them (characters, milestones, events, and leitmotifs) and the ensuing consequences. Therefore, the core of the research process revolved around the participant's reflections on their experiences. This was facilitated through self-reflective narratives prompted by generative questions such as what and how it affected the participant, how they experienced that episode, and what they think about it now. The use of such questions served a dual purpose: to prevent any potential bias the interviews that might stem from the researcher's questions, and to encourage the participant's self-reflection on the unfolding events.

Subsequently, the interviews were transcribed, and narrative analysis was applied (Bolívar, 2014). From this stance, the meaning and interpretation that each participant makes of their history and experiences become the core of the research (Goodson *et al.*, 2016). Therefore, the aim was not to extract elements, establish cause-effect relationships, or define the participant's identity but rather to reveal comprehensive insights to understand the subject's identity evolution. To this end, the researcher's role was to construct an authentic, complete, and organised representation of the narrative. This involved organizing the discourse around key themes that would contribute to understanding the experiences narrated and their impact on the self (Mula-Falcón, 2023).

To facilitate the analysis, the qualitative data analysis software Nvivo 12 was used. This was used to provide organisation and structure to the coding tasks, a key element for the qualitative analysis (Gibbs, 2022). In addition, a biogram was drawn up to highlight stages of

the participant's life, as well as the aspects that impacted them and the associated consequences for their identity evolution.

2.1 Participant

The choice of our key informant was made through deliberate processes based on whether they met certain requirements and/or characteristics. These characteristics were established as a result of a previous quantitative study within the project in which this study is framed ("The influence of neoliberalism on academic identities and the level of professional satisfaction" -PID2019-105631GA-I00/SRA), which is funded by the Ministry of Science and Innovation of the government of Spain. Therefore, the discipline (social sciences) and the unstable categories (which are those directly facing the evaluation system—assistant doctor, contracted doctor and recent associate professor—) were chosen as the main feature, given the notable influence that the current system exerts on this profile, according to quantitative results.

To meet this requirement, two types of non-probability sampling were employed. First, convenience sampling (Martínez-Salgado, 2012) was used to recruit volunteers who expressed interest after participating in the previous quantitative study. Second, non-probabilistic snowball sampling was applied (Noy, 2008), considering other factors such as accessibility, interest in participation, and availability.

As a result, 30 participants took part in the study (both men and women from Social Sciences, belonging to one of the previously mentioned categories), a number determined by the thematic saturation criterion (Kei and Harland, 2018). From the 30 participants, a paradigmatic case (Flyvbjerg and Casado, 2006) was selected as it is considered to be the best type of case for the study of life histories (Bolívar and Domingo, 2019). Consequently, Blas (pseudonym) was chosen for being one of the cases that best showed/exemplified the characteristics determined by the quantitative research. That is, he not only shared features and/or elements with the other participants, but also exhibited them in a clear way (Giménez, 2012). Additionally, his interviews provided particularly rich and insightful information (Flick, 2015).

Finally, it is important to note that, as this is a single case, the results are not statistical generalisable, but analytical-relational. That is, rather than pursuing broad generalisations (typical of quantitative studies with statistically representative samples), the focus of this study aligns with the qualitative approach, which emphasises depth and intensity of analysis and transferability (Braun and Clarke, 2022). In essence, this work strives to deliver a rigorous and profound contribution to existing knowledge on the subject, introducing fresh insights and nuances to the international debate. This is particularly significant within the context of Spain, a setting that has been underexplored in this regard (Mula-Falcón *et al.*, 2022).

2.2 Ethical considerations

From the beginning of the research process, this study received the approval of the ethics committee of the university where the study was conducted, while informed consent, both verbal and written, and was obtained from the participant. Additionally, the physical, psychological and social integrity of the participant was guaranteed through anonymity; respectful treatment of the information provided; and continuous validation processes for both the interviews and the final article.

3. Results: the story of Blas

In this section we recount the professional journey of Blas. Blas is a 36-year-old university lecturer in Social Sciences. He studied undergraduate and master's degrees at a publicly

funded university. After completing his master's degree, he started his research work with a doctoral thesis. During the four years of his doctoral studies he did not receive any grants, contracts, or funding. After completing his thesis, Blas spent one year without any contracts associated with universities. In the following four years, he held teaching posts in various public universities through Temporary Substitute Teacher positions [2] (hereinafter TSC). It was during this period that he was accredited as Assistant Doctor and, two years later, he obtained a position in the same category at a public university. Currently, Blas is an Assistant Doctor, he is a father, and he is working in management positions.

Throughout his professional trajectory, changes can be observed in his conception of the university world, in the development of his practices, and, therefore, in the construction of his academic identity. To facilitate the analysis, his trajectory was divided into four stages: First Stage: *Eyes that don't see, heart that doesn't feel*; Second Stage: *Bang! Reality check*; Third Stage: *On the hamster wheel*; and Fourth Stage: *Tick-Tock*. In the following section, the most salient elements of each stage and the impact they generate both personally and professionally will be analysed. In addition, to visualise the results, a biogram has been drawn up (Table 1) in which the most significant elements and their consequences for his identity evolution can be visually observed.

(1) First Stage: Eyes that don't see, heart that doesn't feel

Blas' first stage covers the period from his beginnings in the world of research to the writing of his doctoral thesis (from 25 to 28). At the beginning, his knowledge of the academic world (access, promotion, and functions) and even the doctoral studies themselves were completely unknown to him:

When I was studying, I didn't even know what a doctorate was. Not at all, total disinformation [. . .]. Much less did I know what it was to be a university lecturer as I do now. What's more, I never thought I could be a university lecturer. I think that, for me, when I was studying for my degree, university professors were like these gifted people, gods of the Olympus of knowledge.

However, his concerns, his experiences with the master's thesis and the influence of his supervisor convinced him. Thus, at the age of 25, he began his doctoral studies without any funding. During the four years he was working on his doctoral thesis, Blas was particularly disappointed with his thesis supervisor:

My supervisor was not a good supervisor, to be honest. Throughout the whole process, I had no academic or personal support. He was a very bad advisor, and that affected me a lot, not only during the time I did my PhD, but it has left a mark on my career. There is a big difference between my career and that of colleagues who have had magnificent supervisors.

This supervisor-Blas relationship produced feelings of insecurity, stress, and anxiety:

In the end you were alone because either he ignored you, or when he gave you an appointment he didn't turn up; and if he did turn up, he hadn't even read what you had sent him. That made me feel bad because I started to wonder if I would be able to make it without someone to guide me or direct me.

Despite this lack of guidance and support from his thesis supervisor, Blas remembers this period quite positively:

I enjoyed it, to be honest. It might be the happiest moment in my academic career. Maybe because I had no idea what was coming my way, you know, out of sight, out of mind. So, I really enjoyed my doctoral thesis. I got really into it, I read everything, I learned, I laughed, I cried, I did everything [laughs]. I insist, it was one of the best times since I've been at university, I remember it as a very peaceful, very sweet time.

Stage	Description	Milestones, characters, and key leitmotifs	Impact
<i>Eyes that don't see, heart that doesn't feel</i> From 25 to 28 years old	Completion of the PhD without funding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of guidance and training from their thesis supervisor 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Complete lack of knowledge of the university sector Disappointment with thesis supervisor Thesis the only priority Period of great satisfaction with research work Period of learning and great happiness
<i>Bang! Reality check</i> From 28 to 29	Thesis completion Year without paid work, dedicated to enhancing the CV	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Advice from colleagues about the world of university (access and promotion) First experiences with applications for Temporary Substitute Teacher positions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Absolute dedication to scientific production. Production becomes a priority Development of practices to increase scientific output: collaboration, recycling of thesis content Feelings of inequality emerge due to lack of funding Long working hours leading to fatigue and stress High levels of motivation
<i>On the hamster wheel</i> From 30 to 33 years old	First teaching experiences Accreditation as Assistant Doctor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> First teaching experiences Awareness of the importance of scientific production for continuity in the academic world Great job insecurity: temporary contracts at various universities First rejection of a position as Assistant Doctor Internal debate on the decision to leave 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teaching practices evolve from full engagement to being relegated to second place High levels of stress and anxiety Family consequences Job and professional disillusionment and dissatisfaction Consideration of other career options (fear of disappointment and lost time)
<i>Tick-Tock</i> From 34 to 36 years old	Position of Assistant Doctor Paternity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assistant doctor position Paternity Heavy workload Expectations for the future 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Second happiest moment in professional career Changes in their work and dedication Unfulfillment in the development of work Fear of upcoming accreditations Stress and fear of family sacrifice

Table 1.
Blas' biogram

Source(s): Authors' own

(2) Second Stage: Bang! Reality check

Moving forward in Blas' story, his second stage begins the day after completing his doctoral thesis and lasts one year until his first contract as a university lecturer (from 28 to 29). For Blas, the completion of his doctoral studies was one of the most fulfilling moments of his career. However, these feelings were short-lived:

The day I completed the thesis was one of the happiest days of my life. I felt super proud of myself and of having made it that far. But then, of course, the day after, I found myself as a doctor, on the unemployment line and not knowing what to do. But wasn't a PhD good enough to be a university lecturer? Yes, but you need other things. You don't know the frustration and disappointment I began to feel.

At that time, one of his colleagues and the information gathered through different social networks were decisive:

One day, when I was desperate, I sent an email to a colleague and he was clear. He explained to me how the world of the university worked and some of its "little tricks" and it was like bang, reality check. [. . .] I also got a lot of help from some of the Twitter and Facebook groups that are there about accreditation and different information about the university, it helps more than you think. [. . .] So after the four years invested in the thesis, I wasn't going to give up now. I had to put all my eggs in the basket, and to fatten up my CV, they said.

As a result, during the year that this stage lasted, Blas mentions a series of strategies developed to boost his CV:

I spent a whole year dissecting my thesis and turning it into articles, conferences, papers, . . . I had to recycle and make the most of those four years I spent with my thesis "wasting time". I also started to collaborate with people on subjects I had no idea about and which didn't interest me. But of course, either I joined forces, or it was complicated. [. . .]

During this period, Blas also began to look for a job as a university lecturer, facing the new challenge of the bureaucratic management of applications:

My friend told me that research was key, but also that I needed to start doing some teaching hours if I wanted to get accredited. So, when I had a half-decent CV, I started fighting my way through the 2000 different platforms and applied for TSC positions in universities.

Blas remembers this time as more exhausting than his doctoral period, with long hours of unpaid work:

I started a routine of incessant work. A routine that I followed until very recently, to be honest. I'm talking about 9–10 hours a day, sometimes even more. And working every other weekend. I spent a year practically locked up in my room, writing, without vacations.

During this period, the absence of remuneration became a key element, much more emotionally impacting than in the previous stage, even generating the feeling of being at a disadvantage when competing with the rest of the people:

I didn't have any kind of financing, I was still living on small savings and especially on my parents' money. But it was no longer the same . . . , almost 30 years, living off my parents' money and now I had to ask them for a lot of money for other things: meetings, conferences, etc. And this made me feel uneasy with myself and I felt that I was competing at a disadvantage with others who did have funding for translations, conferences, research stays, . . .

Although this stage began with feelings of frustration and stress, Blas remembers it in general terms as a period of great intensity and associated with high levels of motivation:

Let's see, in truth, I was "bitter" and with a lot of stress, but super excited because I knew the goal and I wanted to get there. I wanted to get my place. So, I woke up in the mornings knowing what I had to do to get there, and the 10-odd hours of work didn't weigh me down. It was a pretty tough period in terms of workload, but it didn't affect me as much emotionally at the time as it did later on. I know it may sound strange, but that's how it is, I was excited, and I had a clear objective.

(3) Third Stage: On the hamster wheel

The third stage in Blas' history spans from his first temporary contract at a university to the acquisition of his definitive position as Assistant Doctor (from 30 to 33). He then began his first experiences as a university lecturer. Concerning these experiences, Blas highlights the lack of training, lack of experience, lack of guidance, and, above all, the large amount of time he had to invest in teaching:

The beginnings were challenging and motivating. I thought I had no teaching experience whatsoever. Besides, the departments were not very helpful either; it was a bit of a "you make it, you eat it" [. . .] So imagine the amount of time I spent on each of the classes I taught. In addition, as the contracts were temporary, every time I changed, they also changed my teaching, and again I had to prepare everything.

However, the pressure to increase the amount of research work on his CV gradually prompted him to transform his teaching practices:

The first year I was a TSC, I worked very hard and had a great time. But of course, I was dedicating a lot of time to it, and I was neglecting my research. So, as I could no longer double my working day because I could not work more hours, I had to reorganize myself. And so, little by little, I was preparing less for the classes, I almost didn't read the exams, I recycled slides, even if they were almost not of the same subject [. . .] And all this to find time to publish.

During this period, Blas obtained the accreditation of Assistant Doctor and began to apply for this position. During this time, the bureaucratic burden, the teaching of TSC contracts, and the pressure to continue increasing his research profile came to a head just at the time when he was rejected for his first application for the position of Assistant Doctor. This situation marked a turning point in Blas' career, as he began to realize the many consequences that his profession had been inflicting upon him for some time:

The NO for the position was like waking up from a dream. I realized that I had been 4 years at cruising speed without stopping work and without stopping to think how it was affecting my personal life. I had the feeling that I had been 4 years running on a hamster wheel sacrificing hobbies, friends, family, with stress levels that I had been trying to hide but I couldn't anymore, and all for a job that was becoming practically impossible and that I didn't even enjoy. I did not enjoy teaching because I did not even have time to prepare for it; and I started to hate research because I had to do it no matter what, in any subject or form, whether I was motivated or not, whether I liked it or not . . .

At this turning point, Blas highlights, for the first time, how the option of giving up materialized more consciously in his thinking:

There came a point when I said to myself, is it worth it, is it worth so much sacrifice and so much effort to not even have a decent job with a half-decent salary, is this for me, am I ready? And then I really thought about changing jobs. But of course, 33 years old and with no professional experience; and then I thought . . . with all that you've been doing, nine or ten years invested in this, a lot of money from your parents, and now you're going to give up? And I was also afraid of disappointing. How could I tell my father now that I was going to quit? So, I decided to continue.

(4) Fourth Stage: TICK-TOCK

The final stage of Blas' narrative spans from the time he secured a position as Assistant Doctor in a public university until the present time (from 34 to 36). The attainment of the position of Assistant Doctor triggered a significant change in the development of his personal life:

When you get an Assistant Doctor position, everything changes. You can breathe "easier" and you can afford some "luxuries" such as buying a house, getting married or thinking about having a child, as I did.

In spite of this, Blas emphasizes that there was still a period of significant job instability, especially due to the need to be accredited for subsequent levels. This generated a significant work overload:

I am now focused on accrediting myself to the next level. I tell you, university places are a poisoned apple. Because you get it and a continuous countdown begins, a TICK-TOCK that generates an incredible vertigo and that is like knowing the day of your death. So, the workload is still considerable and so are the stress and fatigue levels. In addition, knowing that now when you dedicate an hour more to your work than what is in your contract, you are stealing it from your child, it hurts even more. But of course, it is very scary not to be credited and not to stabilize 100%, because you have to feed that child, you know?

Finally, Blas concludes by talking about his expectations for the future, mentioning that his first priority is to achieve full stability with the category of Full Professor and thus finally manage to direct his own professional career:

My only priority right now is to get accredited as Associate Professor and slow down the pace. When I get it, I want to devote myself to what I really want, especially I want to devote myself to my teaching, to make a subject one hundred percent my own, and to enjoy it. And, above all, I want to enjoy myself and my family more. I think I deserve it, although my son and especially my wife deserve it more.

4. Discussion

The primary objective of this study was to analyse and understand the evolution, changes, and transformation in the identity of a university academic from its beginnings to its current state. In contrast to other studies, our objective was not merely to determine the subject's current identity but to understand how and why it evolves. Employing a biographical-narrative approach using life histories, our study involved an in-depth exploration, affording us a nuanced understanding of the dynamics governing this identity evolution. In this section, we present a discussion of our results in which we analyse the evolution of Blas' identity, highlighting the elements that contribute to the change and the ensuing consequences for shaping his identity.

Throughout Blas' academic career, an evolution of his academic identity can be observed, which entails changes in his conception of the university landscape and the development of his professional practices. In this sense, in his beginnings, a *naïve identity* predominates, characterized by a complete ignorance of the academic world, which leads Blas to focus exclusively on his doctoral thesis. The results obtained are contrary to those presented by [Caretta et al. \(2018\)](#), [Angervall and Gustafsson \(2017\)](#), and [Mula-Falcón and Caballero \(2023\)](#). According to these authors, there is a tendency among young doctoral students to prioritize the publication of articles over the completion of their Ph.D., recognizing the importance of scientific production for securing a lasting position at the university. Consequently, individuals in these studies often report higher levels of stress and job dissatisfaction compared to our participant.

During this initial period, Blas' identity was predominantly influenced by the "bad" relationship with his doctoral thesis supervisor. The lack of guidance and direction resulted in Blas experiencing symptoms of stress and anxiety, which contributed to heightened levels of insecurity. These findings are consistent with previous research emphasizing the director-doctoral candidate relationship as the most common source of negative experiences during doctoral studies ([González-Ocampo and Castelló, 2018](#); [Corcelles et al., 2019](#)). According to [Weise et al. \(2020\)](#), thesis supervisors play a fundamental role in shaping aspects such as security, self-confidence, motivation, and anxiety management. In short, they are essential for optimal and balanced professional and identity development.

Upon completion of his thesis, there is a notable evolution in Blas' identity, shifting from a *naive identity* to one primarily based on scientific production. This transformation is prompted by the realization of the profound impact that scientific output exerts on his future academic and professional trajectory (Abrizah *et al.*, 2019; Oliveira *et al.*, 2024). This revelation engenders a clash between his initial naive and idealized vision and the performative reality characterizing the contemporary university landscape (McCune, 2019; Huang *et al.*, 2016). Consequently, Blas adopts a series of strategic measures with the sole aim of boosting his scientific productivity. These strategies include the publication of his doctoral thesis, collaborating with colleagues irrespective of the study's subject, and relegating teaching to a secondary role, among other aspects.

Moreover, in this evolution of identity, the precarious situation resulting from the lack of funding becomes key. According to Corcelles *et al.* (2019), job instability or lack of funding are determining elements in the identity of academics. This situation makes them a highly vulnerable group in the face of the demands of the current university system (Saura and Bolívar, 2019; Apreile *et al.*, 2020), encouraging their prioritization of scientific production in the face of the need to survive in the profession and gain access to permanent positions (Djerasimovic and Villani, 2020).

In this second stage, Blas shows levels of stress and exhaustion typical of long working hours. Despite this, he also experiences positive emotions since the need to secure a stable position becomes a significant source of extrinsic motivation. This concept closely resembles that of the *Academic Worker identity* described by Ylijoki and Henriksson (2017), in which the work-related (search for stability and salary improvements) becomes the central core of action of academics.

However, the increasing pressures and the difficulty to access a stable position begin to awaken in Blas feelings of inadequacy that generate high levels of dissatisfaction, anxiety, exhaustion and fear of the future. Consequently, a new change is generated in Blas' identity towards one that Ylijoki and Ursin (2013) call *Job Insecurity Identity*. This is characterized by high levels of anxiety when faced with feeling unable to respond to the demands of scientific production and, as in the case of Blas, the fear of an uncertain future. This situation leads our participant to consider a change of profession, which does not materialize due to the fear of social disappointment and the high personal, economic, and time costs already invested (Dorenkamp and Ruhle, 2019).

Finally, securing the Assistant Doctor position triggers a further evolution in Blas' academic identity. In this instance, evaluations and, therefore, scientific production continue to define his identity. However, the attainment of a more stable position, affording him the freedom to perform his duties autonomously, becomes his primary source of motivation (Acker and Webber, 2017). Concurrently, the pursuit of a work-family balance emerges as a key element, aligning with the *work-life balance identity* described by Ylojiki and Ursin (2013).

During this phase, factors such as work overload, the pressure to succeed in evaluations, the sense of unrealised professional potential and the sacrifices required in both work and family domains generate high levels of stress in Blas. According to Huang *et al.* (2016) this identity is referred to as the *stressed academic identity*. Additionally, this identity is marked by the presence of negative emotions such as fear and exhaustion (Ursin *et al.*, 2020), both of which are evident in our participant's experiences.

5. Conclusions

The results of this study highlight the development of dynamic or fluid identities (Hollywood *et al.*, 2020; Marques *et al.*, 2024) that evolve with a remarkable capacity to adapt to the demands of the context (Angervall and Gustafsson, 2017; Zhang and Gong, 2024) and motivated by the need for survival (access and continuity in the profession). This necessity

renders academics particularly vulnerable, contributing to the reshaping of their identities towards those marked by subordination to the demands of the system, with strong mercantilist connotations (Acker and Webber, 2017; Apreile *et al.*, 2020). Due to the motivating force behind it, we may refer to this identity as *Survivor Identity*.

The analysis of Blas' trajectory reveals an evolution from a naïve identity to a survivor identity characterized by compliance with the demands of scientific production, wherein research assumes the predominant professional role. This shift is driven by the desire to secure stable employment that would facilitate the pursuit of a fulfilling professional and personal life. Additionally, this identity becomes increasingly characterized by elevated levels of stress, job dissatisfaction, and feelings of insecurity. These findings align with those of numerous studies indicating that academia is the profession with the highest burnout rate (Guthrie *et al.*, 2017).

6. Implications

Current academics are navigating a professional culture in which the attainment of permanent and stable employment hinges on passing continuous evaluations of their professional performance, with a particular emphasis on research activity. In short, this culture encourages scientific production that poses a threat not only to the work, health, and life of academics, but also to the future role of universities as agents of social transformation. In this context, it is essential to improve the working conditions and job opportunities of this group of professionals to ensure optimal professional and personal development. To this end, we propose a series of ideas: (1) to carry out a thorough review of the evaluation systems for university faculty; (2) to promote structures for support, guidance, and institutional assistance (both initial and ongoing), which can play a pivotal role in improving the working conditions of faculty members; (3) reviewing the role of thesis supervisors, generating training courses and continuous evaluations of their work; and (4) to make visible the high cost of academic work with the aim of raising awareness among the general population. Only through these efforts can we expect to enhance the work and professional standards of university faculty and, therefore, the overall quality of the services provided by universities.

Notes

1. These categories (literally translated from Spanish) would be (roughly) equivalent to the following (Spanish translation – English equivalent): Full Professor - Full professor; Associate Professor - Associate Professor; Contracted Doctor - Associate Professor or Senior Lecturer; Assistant Doctor - Assistant Professor.
2. Temporary substitute contract.

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